

all we had and all we lost by reddieforlove

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Summary:

He was the last person that El expected to see when she opened the door.

all we had and all we lost

Author's Note:

This is something that I started absolutely forever ago and only managed to finish off today. It is pretty angsty at times but I love exes fics and I plan on continuing it.

Title: Dreams - Bastille ft. Gabrielle Aplin

Jane “Eleven” Hopper had a good memory.

She didn’t remember everything. Her mind didn’t quite have that capacity. But she did have what someone once called an exceptional memory. She could recall things that no one expected of her. Small things. The color of her kindergarten teacher’s eyes. The sound of her mother’s heart monitor flatlining. The smell of her case worker’s car the day that she was taken to her first foster home. The feeling of leaves and sticks under her feet the day that she ran away from her fifth.

It was that same day that that a grumpy small town Chief of Police managed to find her in the middle of the woods.

El remembered the big things too. Reading her new birth certificate and realizing that she wouldn’t bounce around from house to house anymore. Eating that first breakfast with her new legal guardian - *whatever you want, kid, we’ll have* . Picking out decorations for a room that she wouldn’t have to share. Calling Jim Hopper “Dad” for the first time. Walking into school with a new backpack and new clothes and meeting Mike Wheeler for the first time.

Mike.

She sometimes wished that she didn’t remember so much if only so that she wouldn’t remember every moment she spent with him. All ten years of ups and downs, laughter and crying and fighting and making up. The only fight they didn’t make up from was the worst of them all. The one that split them down the middle and purged him

from her life. El could remember when Max broke up with the boyfriend she had before Lucas and how her friend told her that she didn't really remember all of the details, only that they weren't good for each other.

God, how she wished she didn't remember all of the details.

How Mike called her "El" from the day that she put on a soccer uniform and claimed the number eleven for her own. The nickname spread like fire and even her own father called her that every once in a while. How Mike would always have food she liked at his house, just in case she stopped by. How he taught her that promises weren't made to be broken, like she'd been made to believe by the countless people in her life who failed her. Mike showed her how to be a friend. How to love and be loved. How to become her own person.

How it felt to watch him walk out the door.

She did her fair share of pushing. As much as El wished that she could pretend like it wasn't her fault as much as his, her memory didn't let her lie to herself. It had been a perfect storm of one bad thing after another until they both cracked. He left. She watched. He didn't call. Neither did she. One month went by. Then two. Then four. Then six. Then...

He was the last person that El expected to see when she opened the door. The knock was familiar but she didn't dare to hope. It was a coincidence, she told herself. Just a neighbor who needed a cup of sugar and happened to knock exactly like her ex. But there he was, leaning against the wall on the other side of the hallway as if he needed the distance even though he was the one who came.

He looked the same and different. The hair and eyes were the same. The suit was different. Mike hated suits. Of course it wasn't much of a suit anymore, with the jacket slung over his arm and the tie undone and hanging loose around his neck. El remembered that was how he looked after their high school graduation, when he managed to duck away from his mother's camera and undo every constricting part of what he wore as she laughed.

"Hey," he said quietly, tilting his head back against the wall behind

him.

“Hi,” she said, realizing that she was holding on the doorknob tight enough to make her fingers ache.

Releasing it, she studied him for any signs that he might have stumbled over there while drunk. She knew him inside out, even now, her exceptional memory not letting her forget how his cheeks would flush and his eyes would shine brightly. He was affectionate too, always wanting to run his fingers through her hair or press kisses all over her face or just hold her close. No, he wasn’t drunk.

“Nancy’s wedding,” Mike said, gesturing to his clothes.

El didn’t know if he expected her to be surprised. He knew her better than anyone. She didn’t forget. All day long she’d been trying to distract herself from it, trying not to feel guilty while trying even harder not to think about Mike.

“How was it?” she said.

“Good,” he said simply, shrugging his shoulders. “Long.”

She wouldn’t know. El had never been to a wedding before. Nancy’s was going to be her first.

“Thought you might be there,” Mike said as if he could hear her thoughts.

“I didn’t have an invitation,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, but...” he trailed off.

Mike looked torn, biting the inside of his cheek as he glanced away from her. They both knew why. El didn’t need an invitation because she was supposed to be his plus one.

“There was a place for you,” he muttered, still not looking at her.

He hadn’t moved. The distance was starting to annoy her. The conversation was starting to wear on her.

“What are you doing here, Michael?”

His eyes snapped to her, wide and surprised for just a moment. She never called him Michael. That was something his mother said when she was upset with him or Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Max did when they were teasing him. Never El. He was always just Mike.

“Mrs. Byers asked about you,” he said, tucking his hands into his pockets. “So did my grandma, two of my cousins, Dustin’s mom, my uncle, and, surprisingly enough, my dad.”

“And?” she said, not getting the point of this.

Mike didn’t answer right away, looking at her in a strange way that she’d never seen before. El thought that she knew him but the person standing across from her might as well have been a stranger. Ten years and they’d never gone without talking for more than a few days. Six months and suddenly she felt like she didn’t know Mike Wheeler at all.

“I fucked up,” he said, pulling her from her thoughts.

Her eyebrows flew up and she stared at him for a couple of seconds.

“What did you say?” El asked, fearing his answer.

“No,” Mike sighed, finally straightening up from his slouch. “I didn’t say anything. I mean... I fucked up, El.”

His voice was suddenly soft. She hated it because it used to be something she loved. When his voice got quiet and gentle, she felt like nothing could ever touch her, could ever hurt her because Mike was there. But there was a hole in her heart with his name on it and no amount of patching up would make it heal. Before she could say anything, he was talking again. Always talking. Her dad used to sigh heavily and tell him to shut it but even that wouldn’t stop Mike’s mouth, no matter how intimidated he was.

“Nance looked really pretty,” he said, staring directly into her eyes. “But I looked at her and all I could see... was us. That was supposed to be us someday.”

“Mike.”

Her voice came out quieter than she wanted it to and definitely sounded weaker and more pleading than she was comfortable with. All that El wanted him to do was stop. Just stop. He stared at her and she wondered if she said that aloud too.

“Why are you here?” she asked wearily, resisting the urge to wrap her arms around her middle if only to hold herself together.

“I’ll go if you want.”

It wasn’t an answer. She knew that he meant it. One word and he’d be gone. Just like before. Her stomach churned at the thought of watching him walk away again but she wasn’t sure that letting him past her was a good idea either. Mostly it was the lost look in his eyes, a look that she could definitely empathize with. Plus it was cold out in the hall, enough to have goosebumps breaking out on her skin. So she stepped to the side, pushing the door open a little wider.

“Tea or coffee?”

He looked at her with a painfully hopeful look on his face, taking a step forward.

“Whatever you’re making,” Mike said, walking in slowly.

El didn’t linger at the door, shutting and locking it before walking into her kitchen. He knew his way around the apartment just fine. It used to be theirs, after all. She put a kettle of water on the stove and began pulling boxes of teabags out of the cabinet to the left of the fridge, looking through to see if she still had any of the blend that he liked. Sure enough, there was an unopened box that had been hidden away in the back.

“Your light’s out.”

She swallowed hard and turned around. The tie and jacket were gone and he was in the middle of rolling the sleeves of his white dress shirt up to his elbows. But his eyes were on the ceiling where one of her kitchen lights was burned out.

“Yeah,” she sighed, running a hand through her hair. “I keep meaning to replace it but I don’t know where my lightbulbs are and work has been... work. I haven’t had time to go buy any.”

His eyes dropped to her and he seemed to consider something for a moment before turning around to walk out. She stared after him with a frown. The sound of a door opening and some shuffling. The water was almost boiling by the time he reappeared, holding a bulb that would fit the fixture perfectly.

“Hall closet,” Mike said, grabbing a chair from the dining table. “Shoebox on the top shelf.”

El should have realized that he would know exactly where they were. There were some things that she could take care of herself but it was always too tempting to resist taking advantage of Mike’s height. Now, however, she couldn’t let herself depend on him. That would lead her down a path she wasn’t sure she was willing to take.

“I can take care of it, just leave it on the counter,” she said, turning around to switch off the burner.

“It’s not a big deal,” he told her, setting the chair in the middle of the room.

“Stop!”

El spun around again and he froze with one foot on the chair, his wide eyes on her.

“You can’t just-” she huffed, hating how her eyes were finally catching up to her emotions, filling with stinging tears. “You can’t walk back in here and-and...”

“El,” he said in that same soft voice.

She took a deep breath, letting out slowly before wiping at her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Mike said.

El shook her head, on the verge of telling him that this wasn’t a good idea after all. That he shouldn’t be here and they definitely shouldn’t

be doing whatever they were doing. But then Mike was setting the lightbulb on the counter and pulling two mugs down from her cabinet. She couldn't do much but watch as he filled them both with hot water, her arms crossed protectively over her chest. He dropped a teabag into each mug, one of his own and one of her favorites, before grabbing the sugar and making his way to the table. Once he had it all set up, Mike looked over at her with a hesitant expression.

"Sit with me?" he said.

She didn't answer at first, pressing her lips together and swallowing hard before nodding once, pushing off of the counter to cross the room. Mike waited for her to sit at the end of the table first, taking the chair directly to her right.

"Tell me about work," he said quietly as El played with the string of her teabag.

Her eyes lifted and she saw that he was looking at her with both interest and concern. It was hard to blame him for it. Working as a counselor for a non-profit that focused on foster kids, a cause close to her heart, was hardly ever easy. Mike knew that.

"A group home got shut down two weeks ago," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear as her eyes dropped back to the steaming mug in front of her. "It took six separate claims of misconduct for it to finally happen. It should never take that long. We were called in to sit down with some of the kids."

El shook her head, feeling angry about it all over again..

"It's bad," Mike said without having to hear any details.

"I can't even begin to describe it," she said.

"Have you talked to anyone?"

She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. The look on her face told Mike everything that he needed to know.

"I don't want to burden my dad and the others..." El trailed off, dropping her hand to the table. "They just don't get it."

There were very few people that she'd actually filled in on her life before Hawkins. It wasn't that she didn't love and trust Max, Dustin, Lucas, and Will. El just held parts of herself close to her chest and only let certain people know. Mike was one of those people.

"So talk to me," he said.

Her eyes snapped to his and she held his stare, wondering if he meant it.

"You shouldn't be alone with this," Mike sighed, reaching out to close his hand over hers. "We... we were always more than just a couple, El. I want to be here for you."

A lump rose in her throat and she nodded slowly. It was too tempting to lean on him right now. She had gone without someone to talk to, *really* talk to, for the last few months and it was weighing on her. So she opened her mouth and everything poured out. Mike could be trusted not to repeat a word she said, so she told him about the state of some of the kids that she sat down with and how some of them didn't even say a word. Others yelled and cried and called her every name in the book because they were so angry.

El was angry too. She remembered being that scared child with fury and heartbreak filling her tiny body to the brim. She let them scream because it had been so long since anyone listened to them. She knew how it felt. They deserved to be heard. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she talked but Mike didn't let go of her hand once, keeping his attention fully on her as she unloaded her heavy heart. The feeling of his thumb rubbing soothing circles over the back of her hand relaxed her.

"You're doing good work," Mike said when she finished.

She nodded, wiping at her cheeks with her free hand.

"I just wish that it wasn't always so hard," El said.

He didn't say anything, lifting her hand to brush a kiss over her knuckles. It tugged at her bruised heart and made her breath hitch in her throat. It was something that he would always do before. The

panicked look that flitted through his eyes told her that he didn't exactly mean to do it. Some habits were hard to break. Mike opened his mouth, undoubtedly to apologize, but she didn't let him. Instead she tugged her hand from his and pressed her palm over his cheek, tracing his freckles with the pad of her thumb. Mike's eyelids fluttered closed at the touch. He was warm and familiar beneath her touch and her chest grew a little tighter when he leaned his face into her hand.

"I wish it didn't hurt," she whispered.

His eyes opened at that, their dark pools meeting her gaze. Mike knew that she wasn't talking about her job anymore. He turned his head, pressing a light kiss to her palm that was even more intimate than the one to her knuckles. And this was one that was intentional.

"I love you," he breathed out and she nearly pulled her hand away when his words hit her like a punch to the gut. "That's why I came. It's all I could think, all day long. I love you and-and I let you go. I hate myself for it."

Her lower lip trembled and her eyes burned but she didn't let herself cry again.

"I don't want you to hate yourself, Mike," El said quietly.

Mike shrugged, as if dismissing it as a lost cause. He took everything on his shoulders, more than he should have.

"We both fucked up," she said, using his earlier words. "We both let go."

He didn't argue with her, not wanting to get in a battle of wills right now. El didn't want to fight at all. She was too tired and she missed him too much.

"Maybe... you can change my light bulb," she said, extending a metaphorical olive branch.

Mike stared at her for a moment before his eyes lit up a little and a smile tugged at his lips.

“Yeah?” he said, his voice hopeful again.

El nodded, stroking her fingers through his hair in that way he loved.

“Yeah,” she said.

They didn’t move for a long time, sitting in the kitchen with laced fingers and soft words exchanged between them, catching each other up on everything that they’d missed. It was a start and, for right now, that was enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

I would love to hear what you think!

tumblr - reddieforlove (send me prompts or just asks about anything if you want)